



Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

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Are we there yet? Early education responding to the challenges of climate disruption and sustainability

Associate Professor Julie M. Davis
School of Early Childhood
Faculty of Education
Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane

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We are now in 'The Critical Decade' (Steffen & Hughes, 2013) when the world's peoples must make strong choices if we are to avert the worst impacts of climate disruption. Yet, addressing climate disruption, challenging though this is, is not humanity's biggest problem – rather, climate disruption is a symptom of unsustainable development models that depend on continuous economic growth that shape how we live. Our fragile, complex and interconnected environments are at risk from accelerating habitat loss, global warming, and massively increased resource extraction that destroys habitats and landscapes. Unsustainable ways of living are already causing declining social, economic, and environmental standards and increasing risks to populations, especially to the poorest and most vulnerable. As Vandana Shiva, physicist, environmental activist and eco-feminist remarked in her Reith lectures (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2000), "sustainability demands that we move out of the economic trap that is leaving no space for other species and other people" while Bonnett (2002) calls for the exploration of sustainability as a 'frame of mind' (p. 9), a metaphysical transformation that qualitatively shifts outlook and relationships where "the attitude of sustainability is not a bolt on option but a necessity" (p. 19).

Many people think that sustainability is mainly about environmental issues and, although such concerns have traditionally been the focus, newer conceptions seek broader, more wholistic, understandings that emphasise the interconnections between the social, economic and environmental dimensions of development. Thus, issues of poverty, income disparity, global movements of refugees and asylum seekers, and the status of 4th world populations living poorly within 1st world societies are part of the contemporary sustainability agenda.

All of society, and all of education, has a role to play in addressing our shared, unsustainable ways of living. However, more of the same kind of education that has contributed to inappropriate forms of human development is not the answer (Orr, 2004). Transformative education embedded in social change and empowerment is required, even in the early years. Early childhood education must continue to evolve in order to play its part in shaping sustainable futures. This does not mean throwing out the successful practices that already work for children and families - in fact, there is much in early education that already supports education for sustainability (EfS). And we know that early childhood education is not the same as it was 100, 50, or even 20 years ago. One line of reasoning is that the field has always been responsive to societal challenges and has been used as a political arena for societal change (Hagglund & Johansson, 2014). I contend that unsustainable social, economic and environmental practices and mindsets represent our contemporary challenge. Early education must, for example, push beyond nature education, recycling and gardening as the main practices of education for sustainability; it must refresh its curriculum and pedagogical theories (Davis & Elliott,

2014), and needs to problematise reliance of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Davis, 2014). Focusing on changing mindsets rather than activities, exploring eco-transformative approaches to curriculum, and giving consideration to a broadened rights framework that acknowledges multiple rights – not just human/children's rights - are our century's challenges.

Let there be no doubt that the season for change is already upon us. However, we are not starting from scratch. While interest and investments in education for sustainability have emerged more slowly than in formal education, the field *is* rising to the challenge. Early childhood educators across the globe are thinking seriously about sustainability in curriculum, theory, and practice.

My analysis of recent international research and policy initiatives in ECEfS identifies some ways to build in this momentum:

- Strong curriculum, pedagogical and policy leadership is essential for reorienting early education towards EfS. Some services are already leaders in driving change within their centres and communities. The *Early Years Learning Framework* and the *National Quality Standard* are important policies that require strengthening, not diminishing.
- Children's identities as sustainability decision-makers and agentic beings must be at the core of learning and teaching around sustainability. Children are able to demonstrate their knowledge about sustainability issues, are capable of creating change, and can influence those around them to also engage in 'doing the right thing'.
- Services must work closely with their local communities, capitalising on shared expertise and energies to deal with the complexities of local, relevant sustainability topics, issues and challenges.

Where is Australian early childhood education in these change and transformation processes? We are not there yet, but we are leaders internationally - in professional uptake of EfS, in our national curriculum initiatives, and in research outputs. While we can take heart that EfS in early education is moving forward, nevertheless, we cannot afford to be complacent. We all need to identify as leaders, thinkers and change agents for sustainability. While this is important for our own wellbeing, it is essential for our children, our communities, and our planet.

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